

## **Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Odessa/Louisa Complex**

**I understand that the Odessa/Louisa area is managed through interagency agreements. How does that work? Who actually owns the land? Why was it purchased?**

The lands of the Odessa/Louisa wildlife complex are owned by the Corps of Engineers. They were acquired as part of the development of the 9 foot Navigation Project to accommodate the Lock and Dam system built in the 1930' and 1940's. Throughout the Upper Mississippi River corridor areas such as these which would be affected by the new "pool" system were purchased either in fee title, or flowage easements were acquired from the owners. Once the Navigation Project was developed, areas not needed for direct Project operations were transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) through a Cooperative Agreement, in accordance with the 1934 Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, for wildlife management purposes. The FWS further out-granted most of these Project lands south of the Quad Cities to the States of Iowa, Illinois and Missouri.

For a more detailed history than provided above, please refer to "A Brief History of Government Navigation and Natural Resource Management on the Upper Mississippi River System."

### **How is the Odessa/Louisa area managed?**

The 2,609-acre Louisa Division stretches from River Miles 438 to 441, right descending bank (Iowa). It is protected from average to moderate flooding by a COE levee stretching to Lock and Dam 17, approximately 1 mile south of the division border. The levee is integral to maintaining the nine foot navigation channel due to its proximity to the dam. However, seep water from the navigation pool makes some units in the division difficult to manage. The Port Louisa Refuge headquarters area includes 48 acres of wooded bluff, a 4-acre prairie restoration and the office building site situated on the bluff overlooking the Mississippi River floodplain. Only this upland administrative acreage is owned fee title by the Service; the remaining acreage is General Plan lands.

Traditional waterfowl management has been the primary objective on this division since its conversion from an agricultural levee district in the 1940s to a national wildlife refuge. Some cropping still occurs on the slightly higher elevations, but 800 acres are dedicated to promoting growth of moist soil plants for use by waterfowl. Other habitat types include a permanent 45-acre body of water (Prairie Pocket), and bottomland forest. Existing hardwoods in the floodplain were devastated by prolonged flooding in 1993 and high percentages have died, although the 18-acre pecan grove continues to survive. A small 25-acre sand prairie was established on the highest ridge of Louisa Division in 1985. Even though this site was inundated by 1993 flood waters, some warm season grasses and forbs survived and prescribed burning on the unit has helped invigorate the stand.

Louisa Division is bordered to the south by the Odessa Wildlife Management Area (WMA), managed by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. Primary management on this area is for migratory waterfowl. The Odessa WMA and the Louisa Division share recently constructed

water control structures at the north end (inlet from the river) of the Louisa Division, and south end of the Odessa WMA (outlet). Water travels via gravity-flow through the inlet structure and is diverted into Louisa Division or sent on to Odessa. The Refuge and Odessa Unit coordinate water delivery to satisfy both management objectives. Often times both entities need flow at the same time so daily communication and cooperation is frequently required.

Up to 330 acres are currently cropped on the Louisa Division. Corn, soybeans, buckwheat and winter wheat have been traditionally planted. Following the Flood of 1993, vehicle access to the Division was lost due to a large levee break. No mechanical manipulations occurred to deter natural succession, and the area quickly began converting to silver maple, cottonwood and willow saplings. In the last few years farming and burning have been used to reduce tree invasion in the moist soil units.

Louisa Division functions as a migratory bird sanctuary each fall and is closed to public entry. No hunting of any kind is permitted on the division; however the adjacent Odessa WMA receives heavy hunting pressure. A concrete double boat ramp allows access directly to the river from the northern boundary of the Louisa Division. An accessible fishing pier allows fishermen to cast their lines into the diversion ditch leading to Odessa.

**Who decides the specific fish and wildlife habitat management strategies for the area?**

The agency granted management responsibility develops their specific wildlife management objectives and strategies within the framework set by the Corps. Management activities can't negatively impact operation of the 9 Foot Navigation Project, must be in accordance with Federal policy mandates, as determined by the Corps, and must support the migratory bird program, as established by International Treaties. To achieve this designed purpose, a significant amount of interagency coordination is required. In the end, FWS and Iowa DNR managers work together and with input from their respective agencies to arrive at specific strategies.

**Why is the lower water level during the summer good for waterfowl and waterbird habitat?**

The lower summer water level replicates what once happened on huge expanses of the Mississippi River floodplain before much of it was contained within levees and transformed into a series of permanent pools by the navigation dams. Shallow water areas are prime feeding areas for herons, egrets and pelicans. The mudflats exposed with lower water levels are heavily used by many species of shorebirds and quickly develop diverse beds of annual plants adapted to moist soil conditions. The exposed flats also allow germination, establishment and survival of perennial wetland plants like bulrushes and buttonbush. The dense beds of plants support huge numbers of migrating rails and occasional bitterns in early fall when first flooded. As the fall progresses, migrating waterfowl concentrate on the dense plant areas and feed heavily on the abundant seed produced by the annual moist soil plants. Annual and perennial plants both provide a substrate and food base for countless insects and other tiny aquatic organisms (referred to as invertebrates) that are a high protein food for migratory waterfowl, especially important to spring-migrating birds maintaining energy reserves for migration and egg laying. During early spring, the decaying plants from the previous year's growth produce an explosion of these invertebrates that feeds the thousands of ducks that pack into the Odessa/Louisa complex each spring.

**Doesn't the seasonal fluctuation hurt the fisheries in the area?**

Since water level fluctuations are a way of life on the floodplain, fish species have always had to cope with changing water levels. Actually, constant water levels on shallow, mud-bottomed systems like Odessa are detrimental to most desirable fish species. Rough fish and wind action keep sediments suspended and result in muddy water, reduced light penetration and suppressed aquatic plant growth. That creates a sterile environment that is dominated by rough fish. During summer drawdowns, the soil firms and compacts while it dries, and along with the plant growth makes it more resistant to sediment suspension when re-flooded, resulting in less turbidity and better water quality. Some fish are stranded and either die or get eaten by predators every year during Odessa drawdowns, but that happens throughout the river system nearly every year and is just part of the normal ecology. The plants that grow during drawdowns also provide cover for spawning and young fish in following years. The invertebrates described in the previous answer are important food for those rapidly growing fry and it all contributes to a very productive system and well-fed fish. Fish surveys consistently show Odessa bass, bluegills and crappies to be in excellent condition. As part of normal management operations, water is circulated through the system via the inlet and outlet on the Mississippi River during low water periods in the summer and winter. Even though Odessa is a shallow system, there have been no significant fish kills in the last 20 years except the annual gizzard shad die-offs.

**What are the boating opportunities in and around the Odessa/Louisa Complex?**

A signed water trail for canoes and kayaks was established on the Complex in 2007 which has several choices of routes of varying length. Information on the Odessa Water Trail can be found at: [http://www.naturallylouisacounty.com/trails/odessa\\_water\\_trail.html](http://www.naturallylouisacounty.com/trails/odessa_water_trail.html)

There are concrete boat ramps at both Schafer Access and Sand Run Access, and a concrete plank boat ramp on Burris Ditch on the Toolesboro Access Road, all which access the Odessa WMA. In addition, Port Louisa NWR maintains a concrete boat ramp on Pool 17 of the Mississippi River next to the Odessa inlet and another concrete boat ramp on Big Timber NWR which accesses Pool 17 approximately two miles upstream. The Iowa DNR maintains two concrete ramps on Pool 18 of the Mississippi River at the end of the Toolesboro Access Road at the lower end of the Odessa WMA.

**What other recreational opportunities are available in the Odessa/Louisa Complex?**

Waterfowl hunting is popular on the Odessa WMA and it hosted a controlled waterfowl hunting program for about 40 years. That program was eliminated after the 2009 season because reduced waterfowl hunter numbers no longer warranted the special restrictions, but Odessa remains a destination area for many waterfowlers. Hunters also use the area for deer, wild turkey, and squirrel. Trapping is allowed on the Odessa WMA with raccoons and beavers being the primary species taken. Fishing is popular with largemouth bass, bluegills, crappies, channel catfish, carp and freshwater drum being the primary species. It is also a popular bow-fishing area for carp and buffalo. The Louisa County Conservation Board manages a campground at Snively Access that has electricity, water and pit-vault toilets. Wildlife observation is a common use of the area, with bird-watching at the top of the list because of the wide variety of birds using the Complex.

Paddlers are treated to the best opportunities to see a variety of wildlife. Hiking opportunities whether along the designated trails on the Refuge or going cross-county are unbounded. There are excellent opportunities for photography on the area with many unique natural features in addition to the abundance of wildlife. The Complex is also used by a variety of school groups ranging from grade school classes to college classes for environmental education.

**How do woodlands within the complex support the migratory bird program?**

Forest lands along the entire Mississippi River corridor are extremely valuable to neotropical migrants for both nesting and for foraging during migration. Bottomland forests are used by many common birds such as robins and blue jays, but also by uncommon species such as prothonotary warblers having specialized habitat requirements that may not be met elsewhere. They are also essential for hawks, owls, eagles and cavity nesting birds, such as wood ducks and mergansers. The composition of woodlands in the floodplain has been affected by the increased groundwater table from the lock and dam system, flood events, and water management strategies at locations such as Keithsburg and the Odessa/Louisa complex. The Complex has maintained a remnant of bottomland oak, hickory, and pecan found very few other places on the Mississippi River floodplain, which offers a more diverse and different habitat than the rest of the floodplain.

**Why are private docks permitted along the public land shoreline at Odessa?**

In order to accommodate adjacent property owners a narrow strip of land along the west shoreline of the State Wildlife Management Area was pulled out of the cooperative wildlife agreement with the FWS and Corps, and was reissued to the State as a Corp permitted Recreational Lease. The lease allows adjacent property owners to maintain certain developments such as steps and docks on public property. Steps are licensed directly by the Corps while docks are administered through the state's Dock Management Area program. This area is available for use by the general public and is not to be used for any private exclusive uses. Dock owners build and maintain the docks and pay an annual fee for the privilege of having exclusive mooring rights, but the docks are open to the public for walking and fishing.